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Page 4

Page 42

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On the Archaeological Evidence for a Coin-on-Eye Jewish Burial Custom in the First Century A.D.

by William Meacham

Writing in *Biblical Archaeologist* recently, Rachel Hachlili and Ann Killebrew (1983) pose the question: Was the coin-on-eye custom a Jewish burial practice in the Second Temple period? They avoid giving a direct answer, concluding that the custom was "not usually part of the burial ritual" and affirming that there is no archaeological or literary evidence for the custom ever being practiced by Jews of any period. In my opinion, however, there is good reason to believe that the custom was *on occasion* practiced by Jews of the first and second centuries A.D. in Judea. The question takes on special importance when related to the evidence that coins were placed over the eyes of the body whose imprint appears on the Shroud of Turin. I have argued elsewhere (Meacham 1983) that the shroud should now be considered as authenticated—that is, that it bears the imprint of Christ's body. Included in this attempted authentication was a reference to the Jericho burials, first reported by Hachlili (1979), as verification of a hypothesis generated from shroud studies that coin-on-eye burial was practiced by first-century Jews. I am now dismayed to find that the Jericho field data has been poorly reported and improperly handled. Because of its considerable significance vis-à-vis the shroud, the data deserve a rigorous scrutiny.

Much effort is expended by Hachlili and Killebrew on interpreting a text from Bender (1894, 1895) and clearing the confusion surrounding it. They condemn in rather strong and unwarranted terms the "unfounded belief" of certain shroud researchers regarding the custom, their "misuse of the [archaeological] data," and "misleading and false statements." Jumper, Jackson, and Stevenson (1978) are admonished for their conclusion that the coin-on-eye practice was "customary" among Jews at the time of Jesus, when the correct choice of words should have been "a rare custom." The confusion in the shroud literature does not, however,

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arise mainly from a misinterpretation of the Bender text but from Hachlili's own first report on the Jericho excavation, published in 1979 in *Biblical Archaeology Review*. When the statements and omissions made in this report are compared with those of the recent *BA* article, Hachlili and Killebrew may be seen to have committed a number of archaeological mistakes, misinterpretations, unjustified conclusions, reversals, and omissions of a quite serious nature. They are certainly in no position to criticize in such harsh terms the research of others, especially when their own mistakes have been glossed over and left unexplained. A mea culpa would have been more in order than a pedantic tone.

In their article (1983: 147), it is stated that: "The Jericho coins have been cited as evidence that the placement of coins over the deceased's eyes was a prevalent Jewish burial custom of the first century A.D. . . . This unfounded belief. . . ." It is Hachlili, however, who first put forward this belief when she wrote (1979: 34) of the Jericho coins: "Two additional coins of Herod Agrippa I (41–44 A.D.) were found in a skull. The coins originally *must* have been placed on the eyes of the deceased (probably as payment to Charon . . . .)" [emphasis added].

This statement is moderated in its 1983 recapitulation: "In this article [the 1979 report] it was stated that [the coins] had apparently been placed on the deceased as payment to Charon," leaving out the certainty and specific location on the eyes mentioned previously. Surely shroud researchers should not be so heavily faulted for misinterpreting or misusing an 1894–1895 source (Bender) quoting an earlier source (Frazer 1886) quoting even earlier sources (Bodenschatz, Gubernatis), when such distortion of a Hachlili statement is made by Hachlili just four years later. Why did she not simply admit her own part in generating the belief in a coin-on-eye burial custom and explain her reasons for so interpreting the evidence at the time?

The Jericho Cemetery Data

Much more serious are the archaeological mistakes apparent in the handling, interpreting, and reporting of the field data. Hachlili and Killebrew state that "a reexamination of the evidence" leads them to believe that the coins were placed in the mouth, because the two coins were found stuck together (a fact taken to indicate they were originally placed in contact with each other.) This condition of the coins was of course immediately apparent on their discovery but it was not reported in the 1979 article. Indeed, to do so would have greatly weakened the confident conclusion offered by Hachlili that the coins were

originally placed over the eyes. Nowhere in the 1983 article is an explanation given of this omission or of how two coins stuck together were first interpreted as being on the eyes. Worse still, no mention was made in the earlier report that the skull in question was part of the many secondary burials in tomb D/3. This circumstance, if correct, raises

There are five possible explanations for the coins in the skull.

the possibility of direct placement of the coins in the skull, but Hachlili and Killebrew do not discuss it. Rather, they make the confused statement that the coins were "intentionally placed inside the tombs at the time of burial," which would not be true if primary burial took place outside the tomb.

There are in fact five possible explanations for the coins in the skull—namely, they were originally placed on the eyes, in the nose, in the mouth, directly in the skull during secondary burial, or they are intrusive. The fact that the coins were stuck together does *not* rule out an original placement on the eyes or in the nose (another possibility not discussed by the authors). A final possibility to be mentioned is excavator's error or a fraud; Hachlili should declare in what circumstances the coins in the skull were found, by whom, and what verification exists. Could for example the two coins have been introduced, or their location mistaken, by a laboratory worker cleaning the skull?

From the 1983 article comes the new information not mentioned in 1979 that a single coin (4 B.C.–A.D. 6) was found inside another skull, in a coffin burial in tomb D/18. Again, the omission of this fact from the earlier report is not explained; it was referred to in 1979 simply as one of two coins "found with coffin burials." And again, the new information conveniently indicates to Hachlili and Killebrew that the Jewish practice was to place a coin or coins in the mouth, not on the eyes, since in this instance only a single coin was present. There are grounds to believe, however, that this coin too was placed over the eye. Indeed, this second occurrence of a coin inside a skull renders the coin-in-mouth hypothesis virtually impossible to sustain.

Another coin was also found in tomb D/18, but its location has changed suspiciously since 1979. Then it was reported as "found with coffin burials," whereas in 1983 it was "found in the debris, at the entrance to the tomb" and "seems to have fallen into the entrance debris." Its date (63–40 B.C.) however falls within the range of coffin-burial tradition in the first century B.C.; it is thus rather early to be taken as an intrusion after the tomb's closure. (Do the remains in the central chamber of D/18 really represent 5 to 7 primary burials in a space of 1.5 x 0.9 m? Or could this chamber have been used for secondary burials in the first century A.D.?) It would appear to be possible, at least, that this coin was originally placed over the other eye of the skull with coin inside. Instead of falling into or remaining on the skull, it could have been dislodged from this "damaged" skull and found its way to the entrance in the course of subsequent movement in the tomb. This interpretation is supported by the absence of coins from the other 120 (1979 report) or 50 (1983 report) Jericho tombs, with the sole exception of the pair of coins found inside the tomb D/3 skull. That is, the coins occur in pairs, and find their way into the skull.

Unfortunately, there is scant data available from the two reports on the Jericho burials to make even rudimentary assessments of the various alternatives. The authors intended in 1983 "to present for the first time a detailed description of the coins found in the Jericho cemetery," but neither the coins nor the skulls are located on the tomb plans. The attitude of the skulls (especially important for the coffin burial) is not indicated, nor is the location of the coins within the skulls. (Normal care in the removal of the deposit from inside the skull should have allowed for the first discovery to be located approximately; thereafter all skulls should have been x-rayed.) My guess is that the coin in the entrance of tomb D/18 was some 150 to 200 centimeters away from the skull containing the single coin, which was on a bench beside the entrance. But why should one be guessing? Finally, no illustration or information is given on the overlap of the two stuck-together coins, nor is there any description of the condition of the eye sockets and nasal areas of the skulls in question.

Assuming an ordinary supine position of burial, the possibility of a coin dropping from the mouth through the foramen magnum and into the skull is virtually nil, according to an anatomist (N. Jablonski, University of Hong Kong) and a physical anthropologist (M. Pietrusewski, University of Hawaii) and judging from my own inspection of burials with coins in the mouth. An ultimate position for the coin in the throat, near the cervical vertebrae, or even in the upper thorax(!) would be likely to result from an original placement in the mouth. Even with the most favorable inclination of the head by 15 to 20 degrees, the possibility of a passage from the mouth is only slight. Among dozens of exhumations of 5-year burials conducted by the Anatomy Department of the University of Hong Kong, loose teeth were often found near the cervical vertebrae, the shoulders, even among the ribs, but not one had found its way into a skull. Furthermore, the coins in tomb D/3 were in a secondary burial. Passage from the mouth into the skull would have had to take place during the brief time of primary burial, when the foramen magnum would almost certainly have been blocked by intact cervical vertebrae.

Passage via the eye sockets is also less likely in a brief period of primary burial, but two instances of coin-in-mouth burial leaving coins only in the two skulls can safely be regarded as impossible. Further, it is doubtful that the corrosion/adhesion process of the two coins would have preceded their movement because of decomposition; that is, they would very likely have separated, especially if their plane of contact was parallel to, or even at 45 degrees to, gravity. To my mind, there are fewer difficulties and improbabilities in concluding that the two coins came into contact once inside the skull. Direct placement of the coins in the skulls is a distinct possibility, especially in the case of the secondary burial. The two coins were most probably placed at first on the eyes, and then intentionally deposited in the skull when the bones were transferred to the cave tomb. In the coffin burial of

tomb D/18, the coins were probably placed on the eyes and remained there until the skull was disturbed. Consideration of other archaeological evidence and the probable Jewish religious significance (discussed below) of a coin-on-eye ritual strongly support the conclusion that the Jericho coins "must originally have been placed on the eyes" rather than in the mouth. They were not simply a secondary-burial offering placed inside the skull. Hachlili was probably correct in 1979, without realizing the complexity of the issue.

To summarize the evidence for a coin-on-eye practice at Jericho: (1) the passage from eye to skull is likely, whereas from mouth to skull is highly unlikely; (2) passage into or placement in the skull occurred twice; (3) coins occur in a pair in two tombs but are not found in the many other tombs excavated; (4) there is archaeological evidence of coin-on-eye burial in second-century Judea; (5) there is an ancient Jewish religious tradition that would support covering the eyes with objects.

The Coin-on-eye Burial Custom

Information given by Hachlili and Killebrew of a burial at the fortress site of ᶜEn Boqeq with a coin (around A.D. 133) on each eye socket is extremely important and runs contrary to their argument. It is a second-century-A.D. Judean burial, with a Bar Kokhba coin (A.D. 132–135) quite close by, and was possibly of a Jew. After noting that the excavator maintains it is impossible to determine the nationality or place of permanent residence of the interred, why do the authors then conclude that it is "highly doubtful" that the burial was Jewish? Surely the presence of a coin from the Bar Kokhba revolt counts for something, as does the fact that rebels were active in the Judean wilderness. The letters and documents of Bar Kokhba were found cached near En-gedi, just 30 kilometers north of ᶜEn Boqeq. This region is also a traditional place of refuge (David from Saul) and last stand (Masada). ᶜEn Boqeq also lies south of the zone around Jerusalem excluded to Jews from A.D. 135–220; apparently there *were* second-century Jewish settlements in southern Judea. But, most importantly, the ᶜEn Boqeq burial establishes that the coin-on-eye ritual was found in second-century Judea and could thus have been practiced by Jew or Gentile, Christian or pagan.

The evidence from the shroud for coins placed on the eyes also must be considered. Leaving aside the question of identifying the shroud figure with Christ, other data such as the Dead Sea pollen types, Semitic physiognomy, beard and pigtail, and crucifixion wounds combine to indicate an origin in Roman Palestine. The evidence for coins being placed on the eyes of this crucifixion victim rests primarily on computer projections from body-contour information in the image. A realistic three-dimensional body figure can be generated, but with a flattened area over each eye. There is a consensus among various analysts (Jackson, Jumper, and Stevenson 1978; Tamburelli 1983; Haralick 1983) on the interpretation of these flat areas as solid round objects—coins, potsherds, or disks. The "Filas markings" are of secondary importance, in that the size and shape of the Pilate coin published by Filas (1982) does match the projected object. The letterlike shapes that Filas and Haralick read as "UCAI" are anomalous in the general image-on-weave pattern and occur in the correct position on the projection object.

The archaeological evidence from Jericho, ᶜEn Boqeq, and the shroud thus presents a very strong case for the proposition that coin-on-eye burial was occasionally practiced by Jews in the first and second centuries A.D. in Judea. This is a reasonable deduction but it is, of course, not yet proven; however, unfounded statements that "this custom existed only during fairly recent times [among Jews]" (Hachlili and Killebrew 1983: 151) and "nor does such a custom exist at the time [first century A.D.] at all" (Rahmani 1980: 197) do not contribute to an understanding of the question. Moody Smith's notion that "one could argue that the coins [on the eyes] prove the shroud to be a later fabrication" (Smith 1983: 254) is an example of convoluted deduction from such statements.

Hachlili and Killebrew assert that the practice of coin-in-mouth burial did rarely appear among Jews but cite no direct evidence for this apart from the Jericho coins. The discovery that they mention of two coin-in-mouth burials (around A.D. 117) at the Nabatean Arab site of Mampsis does, however, indicate that this custom was also practiced in southern Judea, perhaps rarely among Jews as well. The dating of archaeologically identified burial rituals involving coins is tightly defined to the first and early second centuries in Judea: around 4 B.C.–A.D. 6, 41–44, 117, and 133. One would certainly be justified in arguing that the evidence of coins on the eyes of the shroud figure indicates a date within this period.

It should be pointed out that a facile link should not be made between the coin-on-eye or coin-in-mouth custom and the pagan notion of payment to Charon. While the use of coins in burial may well be the result of Greek influence, the custom may have been absorbed quite readily into existing Jewish traditions and religious notions, without necessarily bringing a pagan accretion. The ritual significance of closing the eyes of the deceased is noted in the Bible (Genesis 46:4) and in the first/second-century Mishna (cited in Rahmani 1980). The use of coins for this purpose may have had a special significance, for instance in rare types of death, or may have occurred more randomly, but there is no reason to posit automatically a belief in Charon. Coins placed in the mouth, hand, or pocket of early Christian burials were intended as a tribute to St. Peter (Gennaro 1980: 40); the Gates of Heaven had replaced the River Styx!

Another example of coin-in-mouth burial in Asia serves to illustrate the persistence of this custom with changing religious connotations. The Chinese have an ancient tradition of placing jade, precious metals or coins in the mouth and other orifices to preserve the body. When southern Chinese began to practice secondary burial (around A.D. 500–1000), the jade or coin-in-mouth custom was retained (and is still widely practiced) but with a new meaning—prosperity in the afterlife. The coin-on-eye custom is not reported archaeologically or historically, but recent exhumations in a Hong Kong cemetery revealed coins of the 1950s on the eye sockets of two individuals. Apparently, as in ancient Judea, the coin-on-eye custom evolved as a minor offshoot from the principal tradition.

In sum, we may conclude that the evidence for coin-on-eye burial among first-century-A.D. Judean Jews is strong. The absence of final archaeological proof may be partly accounted for by the rarity of the practice and by the prevalence of secondary burial during which the coins were removed. It seems likely to me that such proof will be forthcoming with the excavation of further primary interments in Judea. But the precise significance of

this minor custom, and why it may have been practiced in the burial of Christ, will probably remain unknown.

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The Coin-in-Skull Affair: A Rejoinder

by Rachel Hachlili and Ann Killebrew

In reply to William Meacham's comment on our article in number 3, volume 46 of *BA*, we wish to make the following observations:

We were quite surprised by the misunderstanding of the archaeological data and the resulting misquotations appearing throughout Meacham's article. In the opening paragraph he misquotes us by saying that the *custom* was not usually part of the burial ritual. We would like to repeat the concluding paragraph from our article in order to clarify our position:

> We may safely conclude from our discussion that the placement of coins inside tombs was not usually part of the burial ritual, particularly among Jews. . . . Though the practice of placing coins in the mouth does sporadically appear, more rarely among Jews, the placing of coins over the eyes is reported in only one case, at ᶜEn Boqeq. Therefore, the claim that placing coins over the eyes was a common Jewish burial practice during the Second Temple period cannot be substantiated either by the archaeological or literary evidence. (Hachlili and Killebrew 1983b: 152)

We agree that Hachlili's first preliminary report regarding the interpretation of the two coins found in a skull from tomb D/3 was unfortunately mistaken (Hachlili 1979: 34). It must be pointed out, however, that this was a preliminary report written very shortly after the completion of the excavations at the Jericho cemetery. In order to make the most recent archaeological discoveries available to the general public, the nature of a preliminary report—and particularly of a popular account—is very general and nontechnical, mentioning only the highlights of the excavation. Therefore it is usually written before the excavator has had sufficient time to research every aspect of the results fully. Subsequent or final excavation reports often correct and elaborate on points first mentioned in the preliminary reports. The final report of the Jericho Jewish cemetery, with detailed plans of each tomb and a full discussion of the finds according to tombs, together with an anthropological report of the human remains, has been completed and is lacking only the funds to publish the volume.

Caution must be taken in drawing conclusions from preliminary reports.

The two coins found in a skull in tomb D/3 were discovered during the processing and cleaning of the skull in the Anatomical and Anthropological Laboratory of the Tel Aviv University. Regarding the coins in tomb D/18, a tomb of the coffin-burial type, one of the coins was found in the debris of the entrance and one in a damaged skull (as originally reported both in Hachlili 1979 and Hachlili and Killebrew 1983b). In all a total of 120 tombs were surveyed, and of these 50 were excavated. A more careful reading and understanding of the 1979 and 1983 articles is suggested to Mr. Meacham.

It is impossible for a coin to enter an intact skull, either through the orbit or palate. As with the case of most excavated skulls, the skulls from Jericho were always partly damaged, which could

allow coins to enter from any part of the skull (for a preliminary report on the anthropological data from the Jericho Jewish cemetery, see Arensburg and Smith 1983: 135–139, figures 1–9). The main reason why the appearance of the two cases of coins in skulls was explained as coins placed in the mouth is because this custom is well known in the Hellenistic world (Kurtz and Boardman 1971: 211; Toynbee 1971: 49, 119, 124, 291, and note 16). During this period, many Jews were influenced by the Hellenistic culture surrounding them and they on occasion adopted Hellenistic practices and customs (Hachlili and Killebrew 1983a: 127 and 128). Needless to say, Jews who adopted such customs did not necessarily accept the pagan significance of such practices.

As the religious beliefs of the proponents of the coin-on-eye custom play a strong part in their insistence for the existence of this custom among Jews during the Second Temple period, it is doubtful whether any argument or further evidence will convince them otherwise. Based on our thorough examination of the published archaeological evidence from Jewish burials in Israel (Hachlili and Killebrew 1983b), the only two intances of coins in the skull were found in the Jericho Jewish cemetery. We wish to restate clearly that there is no archaeological or literary evidence for the practice of placing coins over the eyes among Jews during the Second Temple period.

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"Whose Likeness and Inscription Is This?" (Mark 12:16)

by L. Y. Rahmani

In respect to William Meacham's comment on the article by Hachlili and Killebrew, some short remarks are called for.

One notes with satisfaction the (I hope final) abandonment of the belief in an ancient Jewish burial custom of covering the eyes of the deceased with any objects at all and specifically with coins.

Concerning the still-maintained belief that covering the eyes of the deceased with coins might have been a *minor custom* or *rare custom* practiced *on occasion* by Jews of the first or second centuries A.D. in Judea, Meacham produces now three discoveries. These are, in chronological order, as follows:

The Jericho tombs (Hachlili and Killebrew 1983: 148). Concerning these, I find myself in agreement with Meacham on one point only—namely that the publication of a detailed and fully documented report should have preceded any discussion and drawing of conclusions about the significance of certain details of these discoveries. Answers to this question and all other matters concerned with these tombs are thus left to the excavators.

Preliminary to this, however, I would like to point to the well-known intrusive nature of small objects into ancient tombs or caves of any character and the further moving of such objects inside such spaces, all through the action of small rodents or flooding by rainwater. This is especially true when one is dealing with a large amount of collected bones, as is the case in the communal charnel of tomb D/3 at Jericho, where the foramen magnum of each skull was open to such intrusive objects. It is even more true when such an object is found in the debris of a tomb's entrance—for instance tomb D/18.

The shroud figure. Meacham and others wish to identify this figure as that of Christ, and some (for instance Filas 1982) see it as having its eyes covered by images, identified as unique specimens of coins minted by Pontius Pilate in the name of the Emperor Tiberius in the year A.D. 29.

Leaving aside for the moment all questions pertaining to the antiquity of this shroud (perhaps eventually to be proved by C-14 tests), the identification of the said spots as coins, and in particular as those of Pilate (for the doubtfulness of such an identification see Wild 1984: 44–45), and accepting, for argument's sake, such identification as suggested by Filas and Meacham, one finds oneself confronted by the following question: Is it plausible that two strictly observant and pious Jews, both members of the Sanhedrin—Joseph of Arimathea and the Pharisee Nicodemus (Luke 23:50; Mark 15:43; John 3:1 and 7:50)—together with Christ's own relatives and disciples, would include in a pious burial, undertaken "in the manner of the Jews" (John 19:40), an obscure foreign practice? Moreover, in order to do so, would these good Jews cover the eyes of a Jew who had just been put to death by the Romans in a most cruel manner with coins minted by the Roman procurator who had ordered this execution, coins carrying the name of the emperor Tiberius, in whose name such a death sentence had been pronounced and whose name appears over the emblem of the *lituus*, the Roman augural staff—a pagan emblem which surely was irritating and offensive to Jerusalem's Jews of the day (Meshorer 1982: 180)?

I suggest that using such coins in daily business and using them to pay "Caesar's tribute" (Mark 12:17) was an inevitable necessity of life; however to use them in the manner suggested by Filas and Meacham is neither necessary nor, indeed, likely.

The ᶜEn Boqeq interment (Gichon 1970:139). This interment had indeed a Bar Kokhba coin in the soil of its vicinity, though not actually found in context of the burial itself. It can thus not serve in any way to determine the identity of the deceased or his nationality or religion. Two silver denarii, which were found near the skull and at the height of its eye sockets, carrying the portrait and name of the Roman emperor Hadrian and dated to around A.D. 133, may hint at one

fact only: that this is not the burial of a Jew. Here again I consider it practically impossible that during or after the Bar Kokhba war any Jews, even those who wished to include in their burial rites this obscure foreign practice of covering the eyes of the deceased with coins, would have used coins carrying the face of Hadrian and his name—which became in Jewish lore from that time on a byword for cruelty, eventually to be accompanied by epithets like "may his bones rot" or simply "wicked."

Conclusion

In the political, religious, and psychological situation in which the Jewish population of Judea found itself both under the Roman procurators and during and immediately after the Bar Kokhba war, the Jews did have to use coins minted by the hated Roman enemy in trade and to "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's" (Mark 12:17). Use of such coins in Jewish burial (even if one accepts that such an un-Jewish practice might have been used in some isolated cases in Jewish burial) must however be ruled out: In no human society will people use an enemy's "likeness and inscription" in rites intended to serve, honor, or protect their beloved dead.

Thus, in the above-mentioned third case we are not concerned with a Jewish burial. Nor, for all that, are we in the second case, even if it is assumed that the shroud's antiquity is definite and that the spots in question are images of coins minted by Pontius Pilate.

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